

Coalition for the Upper South Platte Proposal for the EPA Watershed Initiative

Characterization of the Watershed

The Upper South Platte Watershed covers 2,600 square miles (USGS hydrologic unit numbers 10190001 and 10190002), southwest of the Denver Metro area. It ranges in elevation from 6,000 feet above sea level, to over 14,000 feet above sea level at the Continental Divide. Contaminants of concern within the watershed include sediment, nutrients, metals/pH, and microorganisms. About one third of the watershed is composed of the Pikes Peak granite formation, which is considered by soil scientists to be one of the most highly erosive soils in the United States.

Through Colorado's Unified Assessment process, both USGS units within the watershed have been identified as Category 1 watersheds ("High Priority Watersheds in Need of Restoration"). Several stream segments within the watershed already have total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) for sediment (including the area impacted by fire), or for metals and acid mine drainage; a number of other segments are slated for TMDLs in the future.

Since 1996, fire has become a crucial consideration: The watershed is Colorado's most critical red-zone (a wildland/urban interface that is highly vulnerable to large-scale, catastrophic fire as designated by the USFS and CSFS). This summer, it suffered the state's largest fire to date (the 137, 000 acre, or 215 square-mile, Hayman fire), and 21% of the watershed's montane forest has been lost to catastrophic burns since 1996. Fire knows no boundaries, and when fire occurs at the intensity which burns have occurred at in this watershed, it creates myriad environmental problems, including air quality, water quality, water quantity, and habitat problems. The USFS has estimated that sediment potential from the Hayman could run as high as 140 tons/acre until recovery is well established. Fire recovery efforts following the Hayman are expected to run close to a quarter of a billion dollars (on both public and private lands) over the next decade or more years.

Because of its red-zone classification, the watershed is one of 15 large-scale watershed projects currently being undertaken by the US Forest Service; in the case of this watershed, the effort focuses on green forest restoration to return a more natural, and low-intensity fire regime.

The watershed is home to every class of mammal that lives in Colorado, and to numerous threatened and endangered species. It provides over 50% of the remaining nesting habitat for the mountain plover. It has miles of “gold-medal” fisheries (as designated by CO Division of Wildlife), and accounts for 25% of all fisherman days in Colorado. According to the Colorado Natural Heritage Project, it has more globally unique plants and plant communities than any other area of the State, including "extreme" rich fens, which are found in only two other places worldwide.

Recreation drives the economy within the watershed. Over 75% of the lands are in the public domain or publicly accessible (USFS, NPS, BLM, CSP&OR, CDOW, Denver Water, County owned...). The USFS estimates that over 3,000,000 visitors hike, bike, fish, hunt, camp, ski, or partake in other outdoor activities within the Watershed each year.

This watershed is also crucial to Colorado, as it is the primary water supply for three quarters of our State’s citizens rely on it for municipal water (either native water, or trans-mountain diversion waters) and 50% of Colorado's irrigated agriculture depends on it. The Colorado Front Range is the economic engine of the Rocky Mountain region, and it runs on Upper South Platte water.

Characterization of Watershed Planning Effort

The Coalition for the Upper South Platte (CUSP) formed in 1998 as a 501(c)3 nonprofit to provide a “big table” for diverse stakeholders to come together and . One of the first projects it undertook (with an EPA Regional Geographic Initiative Grant) was a Data Inventory and Assessment (DIA). The DIA was carried out as a “starting point for watershed planning”. The

goal of the study was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of watershed conditions and land use activities, which would provide the basis for developing a watershed protection plan that ranks and targets priority water quality and ecological health issues. Brown and Caldwell was hired to prepare the DIA, with the following objectives:

- 1.) Identify and document available data,
- 2.) Identify and rank existing and potential sources that can affect water quality or ecological health,
- 3.) Assess water quality and stream health conditions, and
- 4.) Prioritize areas for protection and restoration.

With information developed in the DIA, CUSP undertook the second step in watershed planning with the development of its watershed restoration action strategies (WRAS) as part of a strategic planning process (funding from an EPA Sustainable Development Challenge Grant). The WRAS was developed over a one-year period by a diverse group of stakeholders. Participants included federal and state agency staff, local government staff, representatives of environmental organizations and the ranching community, and members of the public.

The WRAS includes a SWOT analyses (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) for organizational capacity. It identifies overall goals; monitoring, nonpoint-source, and watershed protection goals, objectives, and strategies; and prioritized watershed issues (agriculture, fire, land use and development, mining, natural sources, recreation, solid/hazardous waste, spills/illegal dumps, storm water runoff, transportation, underground storage tanks, wastewater treatment plants and septic, water rights, water system operations) with goals, objectives, and strategies identified for each high-priority issue.

After the fires of this summer, and at the request of watershed stakeholders and the USFS, CUSP has taken a leadership position in directing long-term recovery efforts. This includes operating the Hayman Recovery Assistance Center (HAYRAC), and providing staff function for the Hayman Community Collaboration Network (HCCN). The HCCN has done some preliminary planning, and activities based on those plans are also incorporated into this proposal. HAYRAC is a unique approach to fire recovery, and the fact that a watershed group has been asked to operate it and coordinate the HCCN underscores the confidence of our partners.

Projects to be Undertaken with EPA Watershed Initiative Grant

Each individual project to be undertaken will address specific goals as identified in the WRAS or in the HCCNs plan for Hayman Recovery. This overall project will be designed as a three-year initiative. CUSP will be the lead organization in coordinating the proposed projects.

We have built this project with a dedicated match of 35%. The total budget is \$1,225,000, with \$800,000 from EPA and \$425,000 from CUSP. Our local government members are committing to work collaboratively to guarantee \$300,000 of our match, with the remaining coming from CUSP's direct fund-raising and our volunteers. We believe that with EPA's support, we will be able to leverage additional nonfederal grant funds, which means we will overmatch: For example, with this project's support, we will apply to Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) for additional trail funds, which would enable us to do more of the 3 mile-long Burning Bear Creek Trail than the 1 mile we have budgeted for in this proposal (this trail has been identified as a big contributor of sediment to the North Fork of the South Platte). We also believe that this project will succeed in targeting additional federal funds from other agencies to the watershed, including the USFS and NRCS.

The projects are:

Project: Organizational Capacity Building

Goals: (From SWOT Analyses of Strategic Plan)

- Develop a strong and diverse funding structure.
- Develop a visible presence in and around the watershed, the state, and nationally.
- Promote our message to a wide audience, bring other stakeholders to the table, especially private citizens, and build strong participation from our partners and stakeholders.
- Strengthen leadership skills of staff and board.

Strategies:

- Create and implement a development plan and increase general membership.
- Increase distribution and frequency of newsletter, and increase other outreach, including but not limited to monthly press releases, tours.
- Staff and/or Board members to attend at least five conferences/workshops per year both to increase professional capabilities and leadership, and to increase visibility.
- Develop a dog & pony show about the watershed and CUSP; take it to all member entities at least once during course of project; take it to at least 10 other organizations, conferences, events... during the project.

Schedule of Implementation: Months 1 through 36

Project Budget: Grant--\$89,000; Match--\$94,000; Total--\$183,000

Expected Milestones Over Three Years:

- Increase funding from nongovernmental sources by \$100,000 per year over three years.
- Have newsletter bimonthly (currently 3/ year) to at least 2,500 individuals representing government, other NGOs, private citizens (currently 400/issue) by end of the project.
- Through outreach increase recognition of both CUSP and the watershed concept within watershed to 75% of respondents to a phone survey (see monitoring section, below) from 58% in last survey.
- Have at least 500 members within the general membership class.

Project: Fire and Forest Restoration

Goals: (From WRAS Issue: Fire, and HCCN Planning)

- Expedite and enhance implementation of rehabilitation and recovery efforts from the 137,000-acre Hayman and other fires with emphasis on impacted communities.

- Expedite and enhance implementation of efforts to restore forest health to reduce the intensity and impacts of future fires.
- Build an effective network that can more efficiently address community needs in future emergencies, including post-Hayman flooding, and future fires

Strategies:

- Provide a central source of information.
- Facilitate interagency short and long-term recovery assistance to communities and individuals, and provide a mechanism to coordinate interagency rehabilitation, restoration and recovery efforts
- Perform restoration projects
- Collaborate with the public, businesses, organizations and agencies on the short and long-term restoration projects, both within the burned area as well as outside the impacted area
- Coordinate volunteer programs to support community and forest restoration efforts
- Create an understanding in the community on how to prepare for and cope with wildland fire, floods, and associated events
- Solicit and leverage funding to assist with rehabilitation, recovery and restoration efforts

Schedule of Implementation: Months 1 through 36

Project Budget: Grant--\$480,000; Match--\$230,000; Total--\$710,000

Expected Milestones Over Three Years:

- Coordinate at least 5000 volunteer man-hours per year of volunteer efforts on rehab.
- Provide continuing restoration on at least 500 acres per year, including reseeding, tree planting, contour felling...
- Help establish a coordinated slash mulch program available to private and public landowners.
- Provide vegetation management on at least 250 acres per year...
- Coordinate stream and riparian restoration projects on at least three miles of stream within burn areas.
- Coordinate a fire/healthy forest educational program including outreach to at least 600 students per year.

Project: Watershed Protection

Goals: (Per Watershed Protection Segment of Strategic Plan)

- Protect the watershed, in particular, Craig Creek (the only unimpaired sub-basin within the watershed).

- Protect riparian and wetland areas.

Strategies:

- Develop and implement an interpretive program, including “welcome to the watershed” signs, Craig Creek signage.
- Private landowner awards for private landowners who have helped protect Craig Creek.
- Riparian and wetlands fencing project in cooperation with ranchers and agencies.
- Riparian tree planting demonstration project.

Schedule of Implementation: Months 3 through 30

Project Budget: Grant--\$80,000; Match--\$39,000; Total--\$119,000

Expected Milestones Over Three Years:

- Six watershed welcome signs at all major highway entrances to the watershed
- Four sets of interp signs for Craig Creek area, and 5000 brochures for hikers in area.
- Private landowner awards—plaques and other recognition in Craig Creek area.
- At least two, 10-acre demo “clump” tree plantings in riparian areas on private lands.
- At least five miles of riparian/wetland fencing installed.

Project: Nonpoint Source

Goals: (Per Nonpoint Source Segment and Issue: Recreation of Strategic Plan)

- Create an “Adopt-a-Stream” program for upper Three Mile Creek, with volunteer driven restoration and clean-up on USFS lands.
- Reduce impacts from recreational activities.

Strategies:

- Develop a specific restoration plan for the creek with partner guidance
- Recruit and train a volunteer cadre, and implement volunteer projects.
- Seek additional funding for subsequent restoration work.
- Work with land-owning partners to implement a trail and campground assessment.
- Repair Burning Bear Creek Trail adjacent to Geneva Creek.
- Work to increase broad public involvement in USFS process and undertake unique approach to recreation area projects and management by assisting to develop strategies for Eleven Mile Canyon & Happy Meadows.

Schedule of Implementation: Months 10 through 36

Project Budget: Grant--\$151,000; Match--\$62,000; Total--\$213,000

Expected Milestones Over Three Years:

- Involve at least 100 community members in active clean-up and restoration, including design, monitoring for Three Mile Creek.
- Provide stream-stabilization and runoff-mitigation on at least two miles of Three Mile Creek including but not limited to riparian plantings, riprap, revetments....
- Have commitments from public lands partners for additional efforts for reducing impacts of recreation, particularly in Eleven Mile Canyon/Happy Meadows.
- Repair at least one mile of Burning Bear Creek to reduce erosion.
- Perform an assessment in cooperation with federal landowner partners on campgrounds and trails to evaluate long-term needs for environmental health and work with staff to further evaluate recreational impacts and approaches.
- Develop and implement an educational outreach program to recreational users, including involving them in volunteer trail rehab efforts.

Monitoring and Evaluation

There is extensive monitoring taking place in the watershed by numerous federal, state and local agencies (USFS, USGS, CDPHE, Denver Water, Aurora). CUSP has been instrumental in organizing and now facilitating a monitoring committee that brings these folks together regularly to share information and data, and to coordinate interagency cooperation on designing monitoring programs so they don't duplicate efforts and they cover as much area as possible.

For this project, CUSP will provide a report that highlights the results from these monitoring efforts so as to help assess success. We will also establish and use photo-points for each work project per the State's QAPP standards. We will continue monitoring photo points annually for at least ten years after completion of the project period.

For the outreach aspects of this project, we will conduct pre & post-project telephone surveys of at least 300 residents within the watershed.

Projects Complement or are Consistent With Other Programs or Mandates

CUSP has been a working leader on a variety of federally and state supported efforts and programs in this watershed, including, but not limited to: The USFS Large-scale Watershed Project, the USFS process to determine suitability for Wild & Scenic designation, and the FWS/DOW wetlands focus committee.

All work proposed under this nomination complements these other programs directly. For example, the riparian fencing project was inserted in CUPSs strategic plan by members of the SPWFC based on that committee's planning and goals.

We have also been involved in TMDL development, and many of these projects (particularly Hayman recovery and forest restoration work) will help meet TMDLs.

Management and Stakeholder Involvement

To date, a number of projects identified in our WRAS have been undertaken directly by CUSP, or by CUSP partners. For example, one stream-segment (lower Three-mile Creek) that was identified in the DIA has been restored through a cooperative project between CUSP partners. CUSP has directly completed a number of projects identified in our WRAS, like providing Water's Ways Kits and other educational materials in each school in the watershed, or working to get local regulations modified to include more protection for the watershed and to encourage the use of BMPs by local entities, but many other projects identified in the WRAS are awaiting funding. In the months following the Hayman fire, CUSP has coordinated over 15,000 hours of volunteer rehabilitation efforts.

CUSP's success is built on its ability to bring diverse stakeholders to the table. Our members include representatives of federal and state agencies (EPA, FS, NPS, BLM, NRCS; CO Departments of Corrections, Parks, Public Health & Environment, Transportation, Water

Resources, Wildlife and the State Trust Land Board) local governments (Douglas, Teller, Park Jefferson Counties, Denver Water, Aurora, Centennial Water & Sanitation, Conservation Districts, Conservancy District) and other NGOs (The Nature Conservancy, Colorado Open Lands, Trout Unlimited, Volunteers for Outdoors Colorado...), as well as ordinary citizens and local businesses who are dedicated to the mission of protecting the water quality and ecological health of the Upper South Platte Watershed through the cooperative efforts of watershed stakeholders with emphasis on community values and economic sustainability.

Our Executive Director, Carol Ekarius, will be the lead employee for project completion. She has almost 30 years experience in the public and nonprofit sectors. She has managed grant-funded projects up to \$2,000,000.

Project Outreach

Through participation in regional and national meetings, CUSP will get the word out for this project. We will submit papers to at least two major meetings during the life of the project, for example, the River Network's annual River Rally. We are active participants in the Colorado Watershed Assembly (CWA), a nonprofit organization of Colorado watershed groups, and will provide information at each annual CWA meeting, as well as at the Colorado Nonpoint Source Council's annual Forum.

We will also prepare and distribute electronically and in hardcopy a final report that will be sent to other watershed organizations and interested parties throughout the nation. We did this in the past as part of a 319 Information and Education project, and found it to be well received and quite successful.